**Understanding Vocabulary**

Vocabulary refers to the words we must understand to communicate effectively. Educators often consider four types of vocabulary: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Listening vocabulary refers to the words we need to know to understand what we hear. Speaking vocabulary consists of the words we use when we speak. Reading vocabulary refers to the words we need to know to understand what we read. Writing vocabulary consists of the words we use in writing.

Vocabulary plays an important part in learning to read. Beginning readers must use the words they hear orally to make sense of the words they see in print. Kids who hear more words spoken at home learn more words and enter school with better vocabularies. This larger vocabulary pays off exponentially as a child progresses through school.

Vocabulary is key to reading comprehension. Readers cannot understand what they are reading without knowing what most of the words mean. As children learn to read more advanced texts, they must learn the meaning of new words that are not part of their oral vocabulary.

The scientific research on vocabulary instruction reveals that most vocabulary is learned indirectly and that some vocabulary must be taught directly. Thus, research supports using a combination of both indirect and direct approaches.

Indirect vocabulary learning

Children learn the meanings of most words indirectly, through everyday experiences with oral and written language. Children learn word meanings indirectly in three ways:

* They engage daily in oral language
* They listen to adults read to them
* They read extensively on their own

Direct vocabulary learning

Although a great deal of vocabulary is learned indirectly, some vocabulary should be taught directly.

Direct instruction helps students learn difficult words, such as words that represent complex concepts that are not part of the students' everyday experiences. Direct instruction of vocabulary relevant to a given text leads to better reading comprehension.

Direct instruction includes:

* Providing students with instruction in specific words that are important to students’ content learning or understanding of a particular text
* Teaching students more general word-learning strategies that they can apply to a variety of words, such as analyzing parts of words (e.g., root words)

Types of words

* **Type A Words:** These words are like Type A personalities. They work hard in order to convey the meaning of the text being read. There are two sources for these words: **A**cademic Language and the Content **A**reas. Academic Language describes the language of schooling — words used across disciplines like genre and glossary. Content Area words are specific to the discipline — words like organization in social studies and organism in science. If you want your students to “get it,” these are the must-know words.
* **Type B Words:** These words are the **B**asics. There are hundreds of high-frequency words. The basics make up a large percentage of student reading and writing. Students must be able to read words like *the*, *is*, *and*, *are*, *been* and *because* — well, because.
* **Type C Words:** The **C**onnectors act as signal words. There may be some overlap with the basic words. Students need to understand the signals for cause and effect relationships, sequence and other important indicators of how text is organized.
* **Type D Words:** D is for **D**ifficult — words with multiple meanings are challenging for all students and may be especially so for English-Language Learners. You may have students who simply freeze when a question is asked such as “What are the factors that contributed to the Civil War?” However, they could have answered the question correctly if asked, “What were the causes of the Civil War?” Students may think they know the word *factor* — from Fear Factor on television or from factors in mathematics and yet they may be challenged when the word is used in another context.
* **Type X Words:** X is for the e**X**tras. These are the words that will not be encountered frequently but in a certain story or context are important to meaning. A good example of this type of word is *spindle* in “Sleeping Beauty.” It is important to the fairy tale, but it is not a very high-utility word. I just tell kids what words like this mean without any special teaching.